



Wisconsin's Making Inroads in Managing Manure

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A commentary by Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Secretary Ben Brancel

Mother Nature might serve up four seasons, but as a farmer, I can tell you there are really only two: cropping season and meeting season.

We're just coming off another meeting season in Wisconsin. This year, a number of those winter meetings focused on manure and the nutrients it contains, especially phosphorus and nitrogen.

We heard a lot about manure as a problem, but not so much on how manure is a resource, too. It's a rich fertilizer that reduces farmers' need to buy and apply commercial fertilizers. We needed to hear more about how farmers want to be good neighbors, and they don't want their wells or their trout streams or their swimming lakes degraded any more than anyone else does. And we didn't hear often enough about the solutions already in play.

The key is putting manure in the right place at the right time with the right method. We've made strides in Wisconsin toward improving fertilizer precision, and with it, water quality. In fact, from 2008 to 2013, we reduced the amount of phosphorus going to the Mississippi River by 23 percent and, to Lake Michigan, by 27 percent. In 2004, we had only 700,000 acres under nutrient management plans; in 2014, we had 2.58 million acres, almost 30 percent of our cropland.

Those strides sometimes get lost in the public discussion. So does the work we already have under way to continue improving manure management and to protect our water quality.

Our newest effort is producer-led watershed improvement, a movement launched by farmer committees with pilot projects in a handful of watersheds for the past few years. The Department of Natural Resources shares responsibility with our department for water quality and manure management. Our two agencies looked at those successful pilot projects and pitched an idea to Governor Walker. When he rolled out his budget in February, it proposed using up to \$250,000 of current soil and water resource management annual funding to provide grants to farmer-led watershed projects.

Under this proposal, DATCP would provide grants to fund up to 10 farmer-led committees mainly in impaired watersheds -- those that don't meet federal water quality standards. County conservation offices could help the committees, drawing on additional technical assistance from our staff, DNR and the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service. Instead of government agencies prescribing solutions to farmers, they will come up with their own solutions, and we will help evaluate the probability of them having a positive impact.

The beauty of this approach is that it targets areas most in need of water quality improvement, and tailors solutions to local conditions which can differ dramatically across the state.

The farmer buy-in that producer-led projects can achieve is important. Farmers know their land and their business, and problem-solving is in their job description. They're accustomed to working with their neighbors when storms hit, when someone is sick and needs help with chores, even on school functions. If this is their neighborhood, they're responsible for it, the sentiment goes. I think most of us can identify with doing things our way instead of the way someone else thinks we should do it.

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We offer other tools to help farmers take responsibility for nutrient management:

- The online Manure Management System (www.manureadvisorysystem.wi.gov) allows farmers to create maps showing spreading restrictions down to the field level. That tells farmers where they can apply manure, addressing chronic, inherent risks like slope, soil type, streams, and shallow soils.
- The Runoff Risk Advisory Forecast, part of the Manure Management System, helps farmers decide when to spread manure. It addresses the acute, day-to-day risks to particular watersheds from rainfall, snowmelt and frozen soil. Developed in partnership with the National Weather Service and the University of Wisconsin, it has garnered national attention and our neighboring states are developing similar systems. The NWS is working to take the system down to a four-kilometer grid to give farmers even more local information.
- Nutrient Management Farmer Education grants allow counties and technical colleges to offer training to farmers at no cost, and sometimes even with a stipend or other financial incentive. We have three staff members who spend a good share of their time in these training sessions or training others to teach the same material.

In addition, we also make sure the standards put in place for farmers are being followed.

- Farmers who claim the Farmland Preservation tax credit must comply with conservation requirements.
- Farmers who receive cost-sharing for conservation practices must meet standards.
- The DNR has strict nutrient management provisions for CAFOs (farms with more than 1,000 “animal units”), and levies penalties on farms of any size if they contaminate streams or lakes.
- The federal NRCS 590 standard, the basis for state regulations, is under revision to incorporate new, stricter requirements for manure handling and nutrient management.

There is still work to be done, but we’re approaching manure management on many fronts. Meanwhile, farmers are moving on to this year’s growing season. First job: cleaning out those manure pits and spreading it responsibly. That’s money in the bank for them and if done correctly it will also mean cleaner water for everyone, including farmers.

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